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SUBJECT: (S) TRIBAL FEUD HAS SECTARIAN, JAM DIMENSIONS

Classified By: PRT Leader Don Cooke for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Karbala Reporting Cable

¶1. (S) Summary: The Shia village of Ayn Tamur in Karbala Province has been embroiled in a tribal feud with the Sunni hamlet of al-Rahaliyyah in al-Anbar since June 2007. In that month, six Ayn Tamur residents were murdered shortly following successful attacks by Ayn Tamur villagers on Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militants in the area between the two villages. Ayn Tamur blames al-Rahaliyyah for the murders, though some outside observers believe that JAM was actually responsible. In July 2008 various entities, including governors of both provinces, have attempted to settle the feud without success. While the dispute focuses on the amount of blood money to be paid by al-Rahaliyyah to Ayn Tamur, the conflict persists due to its broader sectarian dimensions, and may include Shia and Sunni proxies outside Iraq. PRT Karbala carries out QRF economic assistance programs in Ayn Tamur. End Summary.

Anatomy of a Feud

¶2. (C) The facts as we understand them are that in June 2007 assailants killed six individuals from four tribes in the village of Ayn Tamur in Karbala Province. Contacts in Ayn Tamur insist they know the assailants were from tribes residing in al-Rahaliyyah in al-Anbar. What provoked the killings is not known. Historically, the Shia tribes from Ayn Tamur and the Sunni tribes from al-Rahaliyyah have gotten on well. They traded with one another and intermarried; mixed Shia-Sunni households in Ayn Tamur are not uncommon.

¶3. (S) According to contacts in Ayn Tamur, the village was bedeviled by JAM & terrorists⁸ during 2006 and early 2007. Appeals to Baghdad for assistance reportedly fell upon deaf ears, so the tribes took matters into their own hands. Leaders purchased machine guns, armed their men, and went after the JAM; they claim to have assassinated seven of the 10 JAM leaders in the area, with the remaining three and their followers taking refuge in the marshes between Ayn Tamur and al-Rahaliyyah near the southern shores of Lake Razzaza. The men of Ayn Tamur consider themselves part of a Shia tribal awakening and are proud of having given JAM the bum,s rush. While they are adamant that the killers of their six kinsmen hail from al-Rahaliyyah, dispassionate observers in Karbala speculate that the killings -- which occurred just after the JAM,s local leadership was decimated -- may have been committed by the JAM and pinned on the al-Rahaliyyah tribes to cause trouble.

Positions Harden

¶4. (C) An official inquest undertaken by the police in Ayn Tamur identified four men from al-Rahaliyyah to be responsible for the killings. This finding was upheld by the local judge and arrest warrants -- binding in Karbala Province only -- were issued in July 2007. Meanwhile, the Ayn Tamur tribal leaders, following the time-honored custom,

informed their counterparts in al-Rahaliyya that they would settle the dispute upon the payment of blood money. They then levied what even local observers agree was an outrageous demand: 60 million Iraqi dinars (50,000 USD) per victim. (10 million to 50 million dinars per victim is considered normal.)

15. (C) The feud festered as both sides hardened their positions. The Ayn Tamur tribes stuck obdurately to their demands while those in al-Rahaliyya refused to acknowledge that the killers were their kith or kin. As summer passed into fall and then winter, commerce and communications between the two communities ceased. In early 2008, the governors of Karbala and al-Anbar interceded but were unable to persuade either community to show greater flexibility. Our contacts report that Prime Minister al-Maliki, concerned about the feud's potential to rekindle smoldering sectarian strife, keeps a close eye on developments in the dispute.

Shuttle Diplomacy

16. (C) On July 10, PRT officers met with Ali Husayn Abid Ali, a former army officer who heads Karbala's Department of Tribal Affairs. Abid Ali, whose office falls under the purview of the Interior Ministry, was tasked with mediating the dispute two months ago. To date, he is the only person who has made any headway in this regard. According to Abid Ali, despite his lack of resources, he agreed to undertake the mediation because he recognized the potential for the feud to undo months of progress toward national reconciliation. He began by visiting each community to hear their grievances and demands. He stated that he was able to

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win the trust of both sides because he went alone to meet their shaykhs. Following several weeks of traveling back and forth, he convinced senior representatives from Ayn Tamur and al-Rahaliyyah to meet at the shrine of Ahmad bin Hashim, a site revered by both villages and lying roughly halfway between them.

No Deal

17. (C) Following a lengthy and acrimonious debate at the shrine in early July, Abid Ali convinced both sides to accept a creative compromise: Al-Rahaliyyah would pay 10 million dinars per victim to Ayn Tamur immediately but without admitting fault. If the killers, when captured, turned out to be from al-Rahaliyyah, then the Sunni tribes would pay an additional 30 million dinars per victim. If, on the other hand, the killers turned out to be from somewhere else, Ayn Tamur would return the money paid up-front by al-Rahaliyya. (Note: Former Karbala Governor Ali al-Kamonah told us on July 13 that tribal law supersedes criminal prosecutions when both sides agree to a blood money settlement. Once a tribal settlement is reached, the criminal case is dismissed. End Note.) Abid Ali left the shrine believing he had a done deal in hand. However, Ayn Tamur tribes backed out of the deal the following day, upping their demand to 45 million Iraqi dinars per victim irrespective of any findings concerning the tribal affiliations of the killers. Scrambling to resuscitate the agreement, Abid Ali contacted Shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i, assistant to Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, at the Hawza. Al-Karbala'i prevailed upon the Ayn Tamur tribes to lower their demand to 35 million per victim, but could not get them to re-embrace the agreement brokered by Abid Ali.

Meddling and Money

18. (C) Asked why he thought the Ayn Tamur tribes had reneged, Abid Ali said he believed "outside forces" -- including Iran (backing the Shias of Ayn Tamur) and Saudi Arabia (siding with the al-Rahaliyyah Sunnis)-- were meddling on behalf of

their sectarian brothers, in effect undertaking a proxy war with Iraq as the battlefield and the tribes as their agents. (Comment: al-Rahaliyyah and Ayn Tamur are poor villages that almost certainly do not have access to the sums under discussion, so the presence of proxy sources of funding sounds plausible. End Comment.) He characterized the need to end the feud as urgent,⁸ saying that al-Rahaliyyah was able to come up with only 10 million Iraqi dinars per victim.

He concluded by stating that he had come to ask the PRT if, in the interest of reconciliation, it could make up the difference between what al-Rahaliyyah was able to pay and what Ayn Tamur was demanding -- 25 million per victim or 150 million Iraqi dinars total. Abid Ali insisted that it would not be a problem if it was known this money had come from the PRT; in fact, he opined, this would underscore for Iraqis that -- contrary to some conspiracy theories -- the United States has no interest in keeping the country weak and divided.

The View from Ayn Tamur

¶9. (C) The following day, July 14, PRT officers delivered a QRF-provided tractor to Ayn Tamur. We used the occasion to buttonhole village officials and tribal leaders on the feud with al-Rahaliyyah. The mayor of Ayn Tamur told a PRT officer that, from his vantage point, the dispute had less to do with money than pride. The Ayn Tamur tribes felt they had been treated disrespectfully by the Sunnis of al-Rahaliyyah and they could not back away from their demands without losing face.

¶10. (C) Once the al-Rahaliyyah people owned up to what they did and showed proper remorse, the mayor predicted, the conflict would go away. He was not sanguine about this occurring anytime soon (despite noting that al-Rahaliyyah had upped its ante to 14 million Iraqi dinars per person), stating that emotions on both sides were too raw and that time was required to enable clarity of vision⁸ to emerge. The mayor warned that the interregnum within which affairs now stood was extremely dangerous; any small incident could be blown out of proportion, particularly by provocateurs⁸ (whom he declined to identify).

First, Get Rid of the JAM

¶11. (S) In a separate conversation, an Ayn Tamur elder told a PRT officer that he was the head of the village's "Awakening Assembly." His brother, he continued, was a tribal shaykh, and another of the shaykh's brothers as well as the

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shaykh's son were among the six victims killed. This is why the blood money demand was so high. He confirmed that, before June 2007, JAM had run rampant in Ayn Tamur, in large measure because Karbala's then-provincial security chief was sympathetic to the group. He repeated the story of JAM's remnants being run off into the marshes (with some reportedly having found employment at the brick factories PRT officers visited on July 12.) and said he and his brethren had tried to root them out with no success. He asked for U.S. assistance -- specifically helicopter gunships -- to eradicate JAM from the marshes.

¶12. (S) PRT officers also met with the head of the Ayn Tamur district council. He said that the local tribes would resist compromise and were in no particular hurry to end the feud. Asked if this was not counter-intuitive, given the mayor's concern about small offenses being turned into major affronts in the current, tense atmosphere, he explained that JAM would seize upon anything less than a by-the-book tribal settlement as a pretext to stir up trouble anew. However, were the JAM taken out of the picture (he repeated the elder's request for U.S. helicopter gunships to "annihilate" the JAM), then Ayn Tamur would be able to compromise more easily with

al-Rahaliyyah.
CROCKER